

## Using narrative to examine positionality: Powerful pedagogy in English education

SUZANNE D. KNIGHT

*The University of Michigan-Flint*

*ABSTRACT: This article represents one portion of a systematic examination of a narrative inquiry project designed for pre-service English education students. It offers a narrative writing and a reflective writing of one student, Lisa, to demonstrate how the project worked in her efforts to investigate the nature of students, teaching and students' learning. It also points to some implications for English language arts teacher preparation. First, what kinds of pedagogies might support prospective English language arts teachers as they grapple with complex concepts, and how might teacher educators create "safe spaces" where these pedagogies then become possible? How might teacher educators locate themselves in the classroom in order to enact these pedagogies? Furthermore, how do projects such as the one described reflect visions – though arguably problematic – that can be developed into segments of teacher preparation curriculum in ways that support the knowledge base for teaching and that are also responsive to prospective teachers' perceived needs?*

*KEYWORDS: English education curriculum, epistemology, narrative pedagogy, positionality, stance.*

As a beginning English educator, one concept that helped to guide my examination of teaching and learning, as well as my perceptions of teacher candidates, was positionality, which I understood as a contextual subjectivity based on social dimensions such as race, class or gender and shaped by an historical "...matrix of habits, practices, and discourses" (Alcoff, 1988, p. 431). Based on this learning, I imagined that that all teachers entered classrooms holding such subjectivities and that these positionalities informed – even shaped – their perceptions of students, their conceptions of student learning, and their understandings of their roles as teachers. I also supposed that these positionalities affected how teachers managed their students and the ideas in their classrooms. Finding myself empowered by the learning that resulted from reflection on my *own* positionality and thus feeling a greater sense of efficacy and agency as an English educator, I concluded that such a process might also be effective (and necessary) for English language arts teacher candidates.

At the same time I was learning about positionality, I was teaching a year-long secondary English methods course that accompanied teacher candidates' student teaching. As part of the ongoing work in this course, I often gave my students opportunities to talk about their classrooms. I began to feel some increasingly nagging concerns as I heard the blame for academic apathy and failure placed on students. When I solicited possible explanations, I felt the answers reflected assumptions about students, parents, teaching and learning: student failure as a result of parental disinterest, student indifference, narrowly mandated curricula, or student ability. I seldom heard talk about who students were; how students may experience school; how differences in race, class, or gender may account for students' experiences of

school; or how these same differences (between teachers and their students) might also account for views of students, teaching and learning. My students' comments conflicted with what I was coming to understand that all teachers must do: examine their positionalities and how those positionalities affect both how and what they choose to teach.

My understanding of positionality at that point led me to assume that pre-service teachers entered my classroom to some extent already positioned but perhaps had not been given the opportunity to examine their varied positionalities or the impact of these positionalities on their teaching practices. As a result, rather than consider possible explanations for issues such as student failure, disengagement and apathy or lack of parental interest and involvement, they seemed resigned to accept these issues as "givens," thus immobilised or all-to-ready to abdicate their responsibility and to instead blame factors over which they had no control.

However, I wanted my students to consider that their actions could be otherwise, that their realities as teachers might be otherwise, that they could consider any variety of alternatives, that they could make different choices. I wanted them to see that while they might feel discontentment with what they saw in their classrooms, they could also experience feelings of efficacy. While they may not have possessed the ability to change their students' present realities, I believed they could respond to those realities in more agentive ways. Thus, I believed that an examination of the concept of positionality might work to create fresh perspectives around how my students might respond to the realities they faced in their classrooms, that it might move them beyond a "blame game" and begin to make them more aware of how their location in the classroom (a positioned location) might, in turn, affect their perceptions, understandings, or actions.

It was out of a desire for my students to explore the concept of positionality and to "form notions of what should be and what is not yet...[and] at the same time remain in touch with what presumably *is*" (Greene, 1995, p. 19) that finally compelled me to risk enacting a pedagogy around narrative that I believed in, even if I did not always do it "right." I believed that a study which utilised narrative and which I called "The Narrative Project," held the potential for powerful learning.

## **THE NARRATIVE PROJECT**

At two different points during the second semester of this course, my students wrote two stories, "account[s] through which they [they related] experiences" (Gordon, McKibbin, Vasudevan & Vinz, 2007, p. 327), any experience that they believed or perhaps suspected had shaped their understanding about themselves as teachers, their students, their students' families or education in general. I also asked them to identify the salient societal issue(s) they believed their narratives revealed, issues such as race/ethnicity, social class or gender. Once they had named this issue(s), they located an academic text (book or book chapter, journal article, essay) that helped them make sense – or *new* sense – of their experiences, particularly how those experiences might impact or inform their teaching practices. The students explored the connections between their narratives and their chosen texts in reflective writing that either accompanied the narratives or were woven into them.

I intended for the explicit reflective aspect to provide a space for my students to examine what they had learned about themselves and consider how they might apply this knowledge in the classroom. My thinking was that through the process of constructing narratives and reflections, my students would gain a deeper understanding of the concept of positionality (as I defined earlier) and come to the realisation that they may not necessarily be positioned the same as their students. Moreover, I expected that this realisation might illuminate how the varied positionalities of those in any particular classroom, teacher and students alike, might influence teaching practice and students' experiences, as well as shape student learning. I engaged in this writing along with my students, and on two separate occasions during the semester, we shared our writing with each other and discussed our learning.

Through this article I seek to describe how this project, The Narrative Project, worked for Lisa, one student in the class. After a brief introduction to Lisa, I will include information she revealed during an interview I conducted with her where we talked about the project. I will also provide a summary of her story and will explicate how I made sense of her writing, identifying the theoretical constructs that informed my interpretations. Finally, I will offer *Lisa's* understanding of how the project worked for her. While some may find Lisa's story evocative in and of itself, its significance is that it illuminates a possibility for significant teacher candidate learning. Therefore, I will conclude by explaining how and why Lisa's engagement with this project might provide valuable insights for English educators and how it illustrates the possibilities of this potentially powerful pedagogy for pre-service teachers.

## LISA

What I observed of Lisa is that she seemed to embrace The Narrative Project. Instead of approaching it as nothing more than an assignment or task to complete for a grade, Lisa took ownership of her work. Certainly academic success in the form of high marks was important to her. But her attitude led me to believe that she perceived university coursework as an opportunity for both personal and professional development and a site for learning and growth. Unlike some students, who engage an instructor in conversation almost immediately upon entering a classroom for the first time, Lisa was at first a little distant, though friendly and courteous, neither a typical quiet student nor one compelled to talk. However, she engaged in many animated exchanges with her peers. In time she and I shared similar conversations.

One of these conversations took place more formally around The Narrative Project and adds to what I observed of Lisa, particularly her high level of engagement with the project. For example, this project began after Lisa had already done some narrative work with her own high-school students. Therefore, she said she had already formulated questions in her mind that she thought this project might inform. For example, she raised the ideas of taking risks, vulnerability and trusting students. I explained how I had always believed that I trusted my students; yet when it came time to test that trust, I began to doubt its existence. Lisa stated that whether or not it was a fair or accurate assessment, she believed that her students cared about her and her well-being because she had always worked so hard to establish trust.

What Lisa shared during this conversation reveals the depth of her thinking on the ideas of risk, trust, and vulnerability that we discussed. She moved beyond specific events or situations to think more conceptually, and her critical approach led her to complicate those concepts. In addition, the example demonstrates how Lisa did not separate the learning gained in her university coursework (in this instance, The Narrative Project) from the knowledge and understandings she was developing as a result of her reflecting on herself as a teacher and on her teaching practice.

Lisa also stated that she came to this project with some understanding of the concept of positionality, though she could not necessarily name the concept. She believed that drawing on this initial conceptual knowledge allowed her to think more deeply about herself as a teacher. I would argue that it also enabled her to read across her personal experiences and her experiences as a teacher, thus leading her to more fully interrogate her assumptions and beliefs and to further problematise her teaching practice. Lisa already had a strong foundation for this project, perhaps causing her to be more receptive and alert to what the project might teach her.

### **Lisa's story: In brief**

Lisa's narrative was a description of a very specific incident that took place when she was in the first grade. Her teacher asked the students to write down their understanding of the adage: "March comes in like a lion but goes out like a lamb" in their composition notebooks, but Lisa did not know what it meant. Lisa described her continued efforts to get the correct answer. She never did get the right answer, though her class rival did and shared the answer with the entire class. In her narrative she recalled her feelings of failure related to this incident.

### **MAKING SENSE OF LISA'S STORY**

The following two questions guided my interpretation of Lisa's writing: 1) Whether and to what extent do both the content (what Lisa wrote) and processes (the moves Lisa made as a writer) of The Narrative Project allow for both an exploration and examination of beliefs about students, teaching and learning? and 2) Whether and to what extent does The Narrative Project then afford Lisa the opportunity to examine the concept of positionality? Even though I initially framed these two questions as separate from one another, my analysis of Lisa's writing revealed that this separation was superficial and that it over-simplified the connected nature of the relationship between them.

To further explain, the concept of positionality suggests that we all experience the world differently, as we experience the world as positioned individuals. Moreover, our experiences inform our beliefs and our values; in fact, our beliefs and values may be determined in some ways by our experiences as positioned individuals. While this may seem obvious – or common sense – my initial framing of the above questions did not suggest this relationship, causing me to approach my analysis with the understanding that I was investigating two separate questions. However, I determined that perhaps students engage in an exploration and examination of positionality to varying degrees, depending on the extent to which they interrogate their beliefs and values. Therefore, weaving the two questions together allowed me to reach deeper understandings of how The Narrative Project worked.

## **THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS GUIDING INTERPRETATION OF WRITING**

### **Content**

To examine the content of Lisa's writing, I invoked several theoretical constructs from the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger and Tarule (1997), specifically subjective knowledge, objective knowledge, constructed knowledge, and frame of reference. I worked from the supposition that subjective knowledge would be instantiated in written narratives and that objective knowledge was located in academic texts. Therefore, I expected that Lisa's constructed knowledge would be evidenced in the connections she made between her subjective knowledge (narratives) and her understanding of the ideas found in the academic texts she chose. I further expected that this integration would be evidenced in her reflective writing.

The other construct I employed was frame of reference, particularly "re-constructed frame of reference", which I understood as new and perhaps more complicated perceptions or understandings of people, ideas or situations. I believed that this would be signalled in Lisa's statements about students, teaching and learning. I assumed that as a result of engaging in this project, she would have "revised" beliefs or "reconstructed frames of reference", which would occur during the integration of the academic texts (objective knowledge) with her narrative (subjective knowledge) within the context of her reflective writing, where she discussed her beliefs about students, teaching and learning. My understanding of integration, then, suggests that it is more than one way of knowing simply "informing" another way of knowing. Instead, integration is a coming together of different ways of knowing; and the process of such an integration thus affords prospective teachers the opportunity to explore and critically examine their positioned experiences and, further, their beliefs, in order to construct new knowledge – new "frames of reference" – about students, teaching and learning.

### **Process**

While I was interested in the content of what Lisa wrote – the story she told and the ideas she expressed – I was also interested in her processes. What writerly moves did her writing suggest that she made? (And why were those moves significant?) Given my concern with these processes, I needed a way to examine Lisa's writing in order to make better sense of her understanding. Therefore, I looked to narrative theory for insights and drew on Chatman's (2000) explanations of character and narrator (both present in narrative, though having different points of view). A character's point of view is the slant of the narration and reports events, while the narrator's point of view serves as the filter for the character's attitudes, thoughts and feelings about those events.

Therefore, my analysis of Lisa's writing focused only on those parts of the writing that described her personal experiences. The theoretical work of Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger and Tarule (1997) provided a frame for examining the content of her writing; and Chatman's (2000) constructs allowed me to consider the moves Lisa had made as a writer, especially those moments where she as narrator commented on her experiences to reveal her "attitudes and other mental nuances" (p. 98). It was my assumption that this commentary was what led her to identify and/or make explicit the

issues in her narratives that seemed most salient, thus moving her in the direction of reflection and analysis.

However, I further surmised that Lisa did not make “shifts” from character to narrator as much as she occupied both positions. She was a character or filled the role of filter, especially since she wrote personal stories. In addition, she was a narrator, whether within the body of the narrative itself or within the reflective writing. However, her “narrator’s attitudes” were sometimes implicit and at other times explicit, what Chatman calls “commentary” or “judgmental commentary”.

Analysing Lisa’s writing, however, only goes so far and to some extent stops at the hypothetical level. Therefore, after this project ended and Lisa was no longer one of my students, I talked with her about The Narrative Project. My interview with Lisa served several purposes. First and foremost, it enabled me to discover what sense she made of The Narrative Project as a whole and to what extent that understanding aligned with my own interpretations and hypotheses. In addition, because I did identify goals for the project, talking with Lisa about her involvement afforded me an opportunity to discern whether and to what extent she met the intended goals. However, even if she did *not* meet those goals, I remained resolute that she still took something away from the project. Therefore, the interview provided insight into how the project worked for her.

For my purposes here, I will first demonstrate how I interpreted Lisa’s story and reflection to make sense of how this project may have worked for her, as she explored the relationship between a teacher’s positionality (as illuminated through narrative and reflection) and her beliefs about students, teaching and learning. I seek to explicate how she seemed to accomplish this through her *use* or *reading* of her chosen academic texts, more specifically in how she took up the ideas in those texts to problematise both her experiences and beliefs, which resulted in a much deeper examination of how positionality shapes experiences, influences beliefs, and thus impacts teaching practice. Through this analysis, however, I will also include Lisa’s thoughts about both the content of the narrative and reflections, as well as what and how she was thinking when she constructed those pieces. Weaving Lisa’s thinking into my own analysis allows me to add the layer of her sense-making and to share insights into her perceptions and understandings. This additional layer holds the potential to further advance what we might learn about the strength of learning opportunities such as The Narrative Project.

## INTERPRETATION

### Lisa’s narrative

Lisa briefly described the scene that opened her narrative: “I walked slowly up to Mrs. Matzke’s desk, my head down, uncertain – a rare occurrence even then. Everyone else had already shown their answers...” She then showed Mrs. Matzke her response: “Is it that the lion gets a haircut?” Following her realisation that she had the incorrect answer, she continued: “My face turned red. I shuffled back to our shared desks, composition book open, lion with the haircut drawn at the bottom and coloured in crayons staring ashamedly back at me. I am almost crying.” When Lisa sought help from a friend, she heard the “eagle-eyed response”: “Don’t help her! She needs to

figure it out by herself!” from the “Devil-Woman, Mrs. Matzke: “Five-foot ten-ish, two hundred pounds, curly red hair, mid-sixties, and intimidating as hell. She was a monster.”

The phrases “walked slowly” and “my head down” do not explicitly reflect Lisa’s attitude toward this situation, though they are manifestations of her “uncertainty”. In addition, the question mark included at the end of her response to the question is an indication that Lisa was unsure of herself. Furthermore, the phrase “a rare occurrence”, although explicit, implies that Lisa had not often – if ever – experienced uncertainty in school tasks.

Further, Lisa’s use of the word “shuffled” implies her feeling of embarrassment; however, she was more explicit about this in her description of the lion, who was “staring ashamedly” back at her from her composition book. Lisa use of both implicit and explicit narration revealed her feelings. Through this narration, she provided a depiction of herself as a learner: she did not get things wrong; she was generally *not* the last student to complete a task; she was used to feeling certainty about answers to questions. Lisa also exposed some of her beliefs about teachers, implying that they should not be intimidating or denigrating, as such behaviours or attitudes could have negative effects on a student’s ability or willingness to learn in their classrooms.

Lisa ultimately did not get the right answer, though her rival did and shared the answer with the whole class. Lisa described this outcome: “Tears continued to silently fall from my face. Wrong? Oh no, not just wrong. The absolute *furthest* from right in the WHOLE class. It was March 1, 1988 – I was six years old, in first grade, and...I was...for the first time in my life...a complete and utter...**FAILURE.**”

Lisa’s word choice reveals just how much of a failure she felt: the common phrase “complete and utter”. This adds to the idea that this was the first time Lisa had ever felt this way and suggests the devastating nature of the experience. But she also claims:

Perhaps the most depressing part about my first taste of failure is that it actually happened like that. Instead of recalling my elementary years with fond memories, I remember *this* moment, this first morsel of failure – an unknown, bitter fruit to my young sensibilities. I was six years old, but *I* was SMART! I was a Thomson – and I knew what that meant. It meant “the best”. It meant dad’s a teacher, mom’s a teacher, grandpa’s a principal. It meant expectations. Success. Winning. Excellence.

In this passage Lisa contextualised why she felt like such a failure for what was seemingly a small infraction. She had expectations that she believed she had to live up to. She furthered this idea: “A white, upper-middle class mentality – failure is *not* an option. And I knew it. At six years old.”

Lisa implies that her family’s history as “insiders” in schools meant expectations for her. However, there is nothing in the narrative that indicated how that expectation is specifically either white or upper-middle class. She was explicit that it is, but she did not articulate why or how she came to believe this. Nevertheless, she experienced the feeling of shame because in her mind a “white, upper-middle class mentality” meant an expectation of consistent success and excellence.

In this narrative, Lisa raised the following issues: failure, shame and social class. She used her recounting of a specific, first-grade experience to illustrate a time when she felt shame and failure and suggested that her social class – combined with her family’s status as school “insiders” – may have affected her drive to excel and the subsequent feelings of shame and failure when she did not. Lisa’s narration of this experience allowed her to identify these issues, which then led her to discuss the following issues related to students, teaching and learning in her reflection: shame; failure, “both as the actual experience and as the cultural expectations and norms that lead to it”; the conscious choice to accept failure (not learning); academic achievement; social class; the assumption of “shared” bodies of knowledge; and cultural capital.

### **Lisa’s reflection**

Lisa begins her narrative as follows:

My narrative is a story of my first taste of failure – a day in my life that I have yet to forget, regardless of how hard I have tried...[it] reflects my first experience of shame and failure in education – common themes my own students’ experience every day in school, and perhaps, though inadvertently, occasionally through my own actions or words.

This opening to Lisa’s reflection is important in that the direct reference to her narrative indicates that she used this piece of writing to explore her beliefs about teachers and students. Further, she began her second paragraph: “In writing this narrative, I was initially unsure of the salient social issues my story reflects...However, on further examination and through some research, I had to rethink my place in the text.”

This assertion suggests that the processes of writing, research and reflection initially enabled Lisa to reconsider her beliefs about the nature of shame and failure, both for herself and for her students. She continued:

Perhaps that moment of shame was the point at which I chose to over-excel through the next seventeen years of my life. I did not want to have to suffer through that feeling of being a failure again. I made a conscious choice to be a success. Yet, again, that analysis seemed not entirely accurate. Did I have a *choice* at that young age to consciously make? Perhaps not. It is more likely that, as a result of my socialisation in a family of educators, and based on who I was (am) socially – a member of white, upper-middle class society – the “choice” was more of a lone option – a given.

This excerpt reflects some changes, as Lisa was in the process of thinking through the issues she raised and pushing to reconsider those issues using the lens of positionality. For example, she first stated that she did not want to feel like a failure again; therefore, she made a “conscious choice” to succeed.

On the other hand, she also questioned whether or not she could have possibly made such a conscious decision at that young age. Although nowhere in her narrative did she talk about her choosing not to fail, something happened during the course of writing her reflection and engaging with the readings she chose that made her think of failing in terms of a person’s choice. However, she then raised the issues of positionality – race and class – and created another new frame of reference, as she

examined how her “position” might have affected her reaction to shame and failure. Although she was not explicit about the process in which she engaged for these shifts in thinking to occur, the content of her reflection indicates that the process did take place.

According to the following statement, the outside reading Lisa chose played a significant role in this process:

In researching these societal issues of class and failure, I encountered two texts that led me to this deeper analysis of the paths I took in my education as a result of my class, race and family background. Dick Gregory’s essay “Shame” and Herbert Kohl’s “I Won’t Learn from You”, both discuss the notions of shame and failure from the perspectives of minority experience.

Lisa’s statement reveals that she did, in fact, identify the issues that seemed most salient in her narrative and then began her research to locate readings that addressed those issues. Her use of the phrase “led me to this deeper analysis” suggests that she was working to create a new frame of reference in order to develop new – or perhaps more complex or nuanced – understandings.

However, Lisa was careful to note that these readings did not address the school failure of White, upper-middle class students (which is how she identified herself) but instead addressed failure from the perspectives of minority students:

What separates my narrative from these texts is my social position as a non-minority. My “failure” was not a result of my skin colour, religion or economic status – many of the factors that lead students, as Kohl suggests, to “a conscious and chosen refusal to assent to learn” (27). The school upheld my societal position and proffered it as the status quo.

Lisa still believed, though, that failure is the issue, despite this significant difference between her narrative and the content in the readings; and seeking to find some commonality, she wrote: “However, my encounter with failure did have one common strand with those of the conscious non-learners and Gregory’s own shame experience: I was held to the expectation of having access to a shared body of knowledge – in this instance of a silly adage – and I fell short.” She went on to argue that although failure may consist of “a multitude of levels” and “is a universal experience”, it “can lead to the decision to no longer learn or excel”.

She again referred to Kohl, who claims that when students experience failure or rejection in school because of their culture or “individuality”, they make a choice to not attempt to learn. How can you fail when you haven’t tried in the first place? It seems that Lisa’s readings gave her the opportunity to think more deeply about her beliefs about students and learning. One result of students’ experiencing failure or rejection in school because of their positionality is that they *choose* to no longer learn.

She also used her narrative – and the readings – to connect the ideas of shame and failure to larger issues of positionality, when she claimed that the choice to fail “was absent in [her] own experience because of [her] individual culture and societal standing...[that emphasised] education and excelling in school...a striking contrast to cultures where formal education is less central or even devalued because of inherent racist and classist structures.” Citing Jay MacLeod’s *Ain’t No Making It*, she argued

that while her social class – combined with her family background – dictated school success and college attendance, this “culture of an emphasis on education” is missing from many students’ experiences. Therefore, “This stark contrast to my own education and experience with failure was thus alien.”

Lisa’s reflection demonstrated an increasing explicitness about positionality, which is especially evident in the following excerpt:

I also have felt apart from my students’ experiences since I had been a failure only because I lacked certain knowledge of my own class, as opposed to because of my race, class, or gender. My reaction – to move on, try harder – was perhaps not what it might have been had the reverse been true. My failure was the result of not being the best: a common goal of my social class. Even now, though, it has taken seventeen years to even tell this story. I apparently have yet to shake the yoke of my upper-middle class expectations.

Lisa’s writing in these excerpts depicted her moving back and forth between experience and academic literature to “get at” the issues that were most salient, issues that her narrative illuminated and that led to her exploration of issues of positionality.

It was from here that Lisa was then able to move into a discussion of her beliefs regarding her duties as a teacher, the first of which was to

not transfer that restricting yoke (one that I did not even realise until now had affected me so completely in my youth) to my own students. As an educator, this story forces me to locate my own position in education as result of my class and family background, and to be able to more clearly view my students as similarly cultured and constructed beings.

She continued by stating that even though her failure resulted in her greater motivation to succeed, her students – “who are not similarly situated” – may have completely different reactions. Therefore, she acknowledged the need to recognise that the cultural knowledge her students bring to class is “incredibly varied” and represents a “vast range of cultural structures and capitals”. This part of Lisa’s reflection illustrated her continued – and increasingly complicated – exploration of the concept of positionality.

Lisa went still deeper, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Yet, it is not simply the knowledge each student brings to my classroom that I must be aware of and address. More importantly, it is the failure aspect of my narrative that must now most inform my teaching. I must consider failure both as the actual experience and as the cultural expectations and norms that lead to it.

Again citing Kohl, she argued that students make a “*wilful* choice to not engage in education” and that teachers often mistake this as a failure to learn or the inability to learn. She referred back to her narrative and stated that she *chose* to learn in order to avoid failure, though Kohl argues that true failure “is characterized by the frustrated will to know.” Therefore, she believes that she needs to:

question which of [her] students have been *actively* not learning because of past failures or educational structures, while [she] *falsely* labelled them as failing. Which students [has she] consciously or unconsciously labelled as unable to learn while they

have energetically sat and willed themselves to not engage with me? These are powerful meta-cognitive questions that all educators should address – and are ones [she] previously had not actively explored.

She ended her reflection by briefly discussing what she might do in order to address this reality, including the following:

- “uncover past failures or points at which [her students’] non-majority cultures have been rejected”;
- “examine [her] own brush with failure and recognise it in others”;
- “search out and recognise those learners who are wilfully not learning and discover both their reasoning and the keys to getting in”;
- “never be the bearer of failure”;
- “create a classroom community where such damning challenges [to cultural identity] are absent”;
- “not *assume* [her] students fail at writing because they failed to learn to write”
- unlearn “[her] own blindness to racism and economic prejudices, developed perhaps in [her] own education and as a result of my individual class membership”.

What seems salient about Lisa’s list is that it reveals her willingness – and her ability – to examine school failure from her students’ perspectives. It also illuminates that although she never names it, she nevertheless wrestles with the concept of positionality.

Furthermore, her list reveals that her consideration of issues of positionality has deepened her understanding of teachers, students and learning and thus impacted her teaching practice.

Lisa concluded her reflection with the following statement:

In delving into my own failure and the structures behind my reaction, I can then begin to *unlearn* the assumptions about student-learners that my own experience created. My vision and understanding has been obscured by the continual sting of my own shame and my inability to understand wilful failure when failure had once so badly hurt me. I need to take this knowledge into my classroom and see my students in a broader light.

Rather than assuming that her students may experience shame and failure as she had, she instead reframed her thinking to consider how her experience of shame and failure may be vastly different than that of her students primarily because of different positionalities. Therefore, this excerpt is an even more articulate statement of how the integration of subjective and objective knowledge enabled Lisa to consider how positionality impacts her teaching, as well as her students and their learning.

## **LISA’S UNDERSTANDINGS**

When I talked with Lisa about the concept of positionality, specifically within the context of her classroom, she stated her conviction that engaging in narrative writing with her own students was especially successful with those students who were most resistant, primarily because she shared her own story. She believed that even if the

students did not like her or her class, "...they do listen". Moreover, this brought the most success with those hostile, "unwilling to learn" students because many times they were the ones who seemed to most want or need to tell her "why they are the way they are". However, in talking about positionality in terms of those students who were not like her, Lisa talked primarily about her own narrative.

Writing about how for the first time in her educational career she did not feel empowered helped her to see herself as clearly upper-middle-class and led her to conclude: "Like that's the only time you felt unempowered in the classroom? Wow!" Therefore, writing this piece – especially the reflection – enabled her to see how vastly different she is from some of her students. She then returned to the idea of narrative, asserting that she needs to use more narrative with her students because it is through narrative that she will come to a deeper understanding of the nature of the differences in positionality between herself and her students, as narrative seems to reveal varied positionalities. She then explained why she needed to know those positionalities: to be more sensitive to what she is working "against" or what she needs to teach her students that might be in opposition to what their positionalities mean for them. She went so far to say: "If you don't understand positionality as a teacher, then you are failing your students."

Although Lisa did not deny that The Narrative Project was instrumental in her thinking, she did divulge that part of her undergraduate work in college was studying the disempowered and social relations, as she had studied sociology as part of her second major. Therefore, she entered the project with some conceptual understanding. However, she realised that the project helped her to see her *own* positionality more clearly, as she had been used to studying "others'" positions, such as "other women and other races". This project, however, helped her to see her own position:

I'm in that position. That's who I am, and I recognise that. But I also recognise that I *have* to – it's a lot easier for me probably – recognising who I am – to make the leap to them, to cross the ravine between my students and me. The narrative helped me to see that much more. I have been told before that I am such a White girl, and I used to be offended. But that's who I am.

Lisa seemed to understand that an understanding of her own positionality was essential if she was going to consider how to best teach her students in light of their varied positionalities.

In fact, she asserted that the project reinforced for her that as a teacher she *must* examine positionality; to *not* engage in such an examination is not an option. Furthermore, engaging in the project showed her how different all experiences are, illuminating the need to be ready for that in her classroom. For example, working with narrative with her own students helped her identify the student she can raise her voice with or the one who might need a hug instead, articulating her conviction that knowing her students' backgrounds – and positionalities – allowed her to respond to what her students said and did based on that knowledge. Identifying this as the affective part of her classroom, she asserted: "If I haven't addressed the affective part, then there's no point because they won't learn." She claimed that while she had always "intuitively thought" this, she was not always practising it and now knew that this was one of her responsibilities as a teacher.

Lisa's responses reflect a deep understanding of the concept of positionality, but they also illustrate her awareness of herself as a person, as a learner and as a teacher. More specifically, they illustrate how she has essentially woven all three of these "selves" into one "self", refusing to isolate one from the other. Furthermore, Lisa's assertions about herself are consistent with the depth of insight she demonstrated in the writing she produced.

## THOUGHTS ON LISA

Obvious limitations exist in my offering Lisa and her story as an example of what the writing portion of this project might afford English education teacher candidates. I understand that Lisa's status as a White, middle-class female (her positionality as I have defined it and as she has described it) cannot be ignored in my interpretation and analysis of the work she produced. Lisa may have been, in some sense, "ideally positioned", as she herself both writes and talks about. Therefore, choosing her as the only student to represent does pose a limitation.

On the other hand, though, I was her instructor for an entire year and had multiple opportunities to observe her, talk with her, and read and respond to her work. I would claim that these opportunities thus give me *some* grounds for my assertions. Further, focusing on one student enables me to provide a portrait of her that is rich and steeped in deep and thoughtful analysis. I am then able to take my learning from that analysis and use it as a touchstone or a point of comparison and contrast, against and across which to examine the engagement of other students.

Based on previous conversations with, and observations of, students from previous years, I already knew that some students seemed more open to the project, while others resisted or hesitated to participate (especially in class discussions). Just as Wilhelm (1997) sought to determine how to engage reluctant readers through studying the reading habits and stances of engaged readers, it seemed to make sense to study how and why some students were seemingly more naturally engaged with this project and then work to build on that knowledge to determine how to promote more engagement in reluctant or resistant students.

Furthermore, Lisa's work with the academic texts she chose is significant. The texts she cited in her reflective writing were seminal texts in an education course she completed as part of her undergraduate teacher preparation. The fact that she remembered those texts – and either saved them or thought to access them – suggests that she came to my course believing that the work we did together was relevant and important.

But perhaps it is her stance toward those texts that is most salient, as one of the key components that supported her efforts was her use of academic texts to examine her experiences and beliefs. Instead of utilising texts to support what she already believed to be "true," Lisa was diligent in determining what the texts were actually saying, and hearing the arguments the authors were presenting. Based on her understanding of those texts, she then used them to re-examine her initial understandings of the significance of the topics or ideas within her narrative. The knowledge contained in her experiences became "relative". Furthermore, the knowledge represented in the texts also became relative. Therefore, she realised the need to "rethink her place in

the text” (her narratives) and was able to construct new understandings. Lisa’s re-thinking suggest a deeper understanding of how the various elements of her teacher preparation might have worked together to inform her practice.

Lisa’s engagement could possibly be attributed to the knowledge and cultural capital she brought with her, and as I have already stated, I cannot ignore how Lisa’s positionality as a White, middle-class woman may have impacted her response to the project. She acknowledged this herself when she wrote about the expectations of her “culture,” the “need to succeed”, so to speak. And based on my observations of Lisa in my class, she did possess this need; she sought academic excellence. That need is not something that would diminish with either age or experience; it was a part of Lisa. Further, though I do not want to stereotype Lisa, being a woman does carry with it an historically informed desire to please (Orenstein, 1994). Lisa may have simply desired to please me, her instructor. This, combined with her demanding academic excellence of herself, may have compelled her to embrace the spirit of the project in order to both satisfy herself and me.

While these are possible reasons for Lisa’s engagement, I believe that other explanations are also possible. Regenspan (1997) offers one such possibility, as she might argue that Lisa was more connected to her own “intellectual journey” (p. 36) and not “cut off from [her] own joy and wonder” (p. 35). Even though Lisa did not write about events that evoked joy and wonder but that instead evoked shame and anguish, she nevertheless did not try to cut herself off from those feelings. Instead, she remained intellectually and emotionally “open” and allowed herself to live through and experience those feelings again and again. As a result, she seemed to welcome “messes, emotions, and attention for sticky social contradictions” (Regenspan, p. 35). She was engaged on a more bodily and spiritual level. All of these possibilities, however, still seem to beg the question of what enabled Lisa to use this project to construct knowledge and create a new frame of reference. However, despite the questions of *how* this happened for Lisa, it still remains that this project seemed to afford Lisa the opportunity to engage in critical English education.

Lisa provides an example of a student who worked to integrate her personal, subjective knowledge with the more objective knowledge found in academic texts (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997). Lisa critically read the texts (both her own narratives and the outside texts) in that she used her narratives to make sense of the academic text, and then she “revisited” her narratives to re-examine her experiences. She also used her narratives to make sense of academic texts. This led her to explore the issue of positionality, as she re-saw her experiences as “positioned” and this helped her determine how her beliefs impacted her teaching practice.

Lisa reached new understandings and constructed new knowledge for herself as she engaged in this process. She also articulated how these understandings, and particularly her ability to “name” her beliefs, empowered her. Based on this sense of empowerment, Lisa described how she sought to provide that for her own students and how this then had a transformative effect on her, on her students, and on their work together.

## LARGER CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGLISH EDUCATION

Questions around how to make this type of learning possible for all prospective English/language arts teachers remain. And while a project such as this may afford future teachers with a significant learning opportunity, it is not without its constraints. I will conclude with a brief discussion of the challenges inherent in enacting such critical work in English education.

While Lisa's case has demonstrated the level of student engagement that is possible with this type of work, it also suggests additional insights that teacher educators might consider. For example, Au and Blake (2003) have suggested that the motivation and desire to improve as a teacher are very individual in nature. While we might assume that all prospective teachers (and veteran teachers for that matter) wish to improve, that may not be the case. Or, if we argue that these prospective teachers do strive for improvement, it may be difficult to identify the areas in which they wish to improve. Further, even if they are able to name those desired improvements, they may not be in line with the learning goals that we articulate or desire.

In other words, teacher candidates do have expectations for their teacher preparation programs. They have ideas on what they need to be taught (Fuller, 1969; Kennedy, 2006) or what they believe they need to learn. Therefore, they come to their coursework with pre-conceived notions of what that coursework will provide for them. While I identified an area where I thought they could – or perhaps should – “improve” or develop, it may not have been in line with their expectations.

Conversely, one of the primary affordances of a project such as this is that it allows students to begin “where they are” as the starting point for inquiry. They can come to realise that their experiences hold valuable knowledge and are crucial tools for learning. Further, it allows students the opportunity to articulate their beliefs, without anyone's saying that they are somehow wrong or misinformed.

The more open-ended quality of this project allows students to explore their beliefs and values in a relatively “safe” way. They are given freedom to write about experiences that seem most significant to them and then identify what they believe are the most salient issues. It is from this perspective that they can explore their beliefs and values and then perhaps move to challenge them. No instructor is standing over them, requiring them to write about certain topics or glean specific “nuggets” of learning from their experiences or from their writing. Because of this looser framework, students may come to realise that they can engage in this examination on their own terms and may not perceive that they are being forced to alter their belief system or their worldview at the behest of someone else. To a certain extent, this might work to minimise the resistance students might display when teachers ask them to challenge their beliefs and values, which can manifest itself in students' beliefs becoming even more firmly set and impervious to change.

Further, pedagogy such as this may provide English education teacher candidates with opportunities where they can gain deeper understandings of themselves. Through occasions such as these, prospective teachers might learn to value the learning born of their personal experiences. These chances might also create spaces where pre-service teachers can interrogate their experiences to examine how race, class or gender has afforded them certain privileges. It is through these opportunities that they might then

begin to build understandings of those who are not like them, particularly the diverse student population they teach.

## REFERENCES

- Alcoff, L. (1988). Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13(3), 405-436.
- Au, K. H., & Blake, K. M. (2003). Cultural identity and learning to teach in a diverse community. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 54(3), 192-205.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1997). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Chatman, S. (2000). Point of view. In M. McQuillan (Ed.), *The narrative reader* (pp. 96-98). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fuller, F. F. (1969). Concerns of teachers: A developmental conceptualisation. *American Educational Research Journal*, 6(2), 207-226.
- Gordon, E., McKibbin, K., Vasudevan, L., & Vinz, R. (2007). Writing out of the unexpected: Narrative inquiry and the weight of small moments. *English Education*, 39(4), 326-351.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kennedy, M. M. (2006). Knowledge and vision in teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 205-211.
- Orenstein, P. (1994). *School girls: Young women, self-esteem, and the confidence gap*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Regenspan, B. (1999). Moving elementary educators beyond laissez-faire discussion toward a commitment to social justice: Lesson plans for the *Dialectic of Freedom*. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 29(1), 33-54.
- Wilhelm, J. (1997). *"You gotta BE the book": Teaching engaged and reflective reading with adolescents*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Manuscript received: January 15, 2011

Revision received: June 14, 2011

Accepted: July 12, 2011